



# NEWSLETTER

News and updates about sage-grouse conservation in Idaho



## 2007 IDAHO FIRES

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Wildfire plays a major disturbance role on Idaho's landscape, and 2007 was no exception. With continuing drought conditions and an abundance of lightning, Idaho experienced the most severe fire season since 1910. This past season, over 2 million acres of wildfire occurred across the state, inclusive of all land ownerships and habitats.

Of this total, approximately 34 percent or 736,000 acres, impacted sagebrush steppe, grasslands and juniper-dominated habitats in the southern portion of the state. Land ownership in these burn areas was predominantly federal (83 percent) followed by private (12 percent) and state (5 percent).

Based on a comparison with Idaho's sage-grouse habitat planning map, wildfires encompassed nearly 390,000 acres of key sage-grouse habitat, defined as areas of generally intact sagebrush that provide sage-grouse habitat during some portion of the year. The majority of key habitat burned was associated with the Murphy Complex fire. Smaller, though locally important fires such as the Bear Den Butte, Inside Desert, Gun Canyon and the Twin Buttes fires encompassed an additional 44,000 acres of key habitat.

Wildfires also burned approximately 287,000 acres of perennial grassland areas,



Elk Mountain Fire (Murphy Complex) 2007. Photo Courtesy: Sheri Whitfield, Wildlife Biologist, BLM Jarbidge Field Office.

impeding sagebrush recovery or past rehabilitation efforts in some areas. Another 32,000 acres of annual grassland and 26,000 acres of juniper burned. Most of the latter acreage, which occurred within "conifer encroachment" areas, is anticipated to benefit sage-grouse and other shrubsteppe species, especially once sagebrush re-establishes.

While BLM Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation efforts are planned or underway on over 650,000 burned acres across Idaho, habitat recovery on such a scale will necessitate a long-term commitment. Given the magnitude and impact of fires we have experienced this year alone, the need to address

habitat maintenance and restoration issues at a landscape scale is reaffirmed. In addition to the Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation programs, the BLM's Healthy Lands Initiative is another significant funding tool available to help bring partners together for collaborative conservation across land ownership boundaries. Local Working Groups and other partners are encouraged to work closely with their local BLM offices and engage in this opportunity.

### THANKS!

The Idaho sage-grouse workshop in Sun Valley was a huge success. About 80 people attended the workshop, including representatives from all Local Working Groups. See page 4 for highlights of the events! You can download a more detailed summary from our website:

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/grouse/>

## LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES

### **What's Next for Idaho Sage-grouse?**

As all of you know, we have done a lot to help Idaho's sage-grouse in the last decade. You also know that there is a lot more to do. The last page of this newsletter lists some the needs but in short, we all need to commit to protecting the good sagebrush habitat we have left and fixing the habitat that's broke. It won't be easy but I think none of us want to see millions of acres of cheatgrass replace the sagebrush country we all know and enjoy. I look forward to working with all of you and I especially appreciate the local working group and SAC members that donate their time to help.

Thanks!

Tom Hemker



### **BIG DESSERT**

The Big Dessert LWG is a new group that first met in February 2007. The group is currently working on their plan, and are doing a lot of tiering off of the State Plan. They

ranked their top 3 threats as 1) annual grasslands 2) wildfire and 3) big sagebrush recovery in areas dominated by three-tip sagebrush. This third threat was not identified

in the State Plan, but the LWG agreed this is a serious and unique threat in their planning area.

### **CHALLIS**

The Challis LWG has finished their plan!!

The 2006 OSC-funded habitat projects have been completed. The group presented

a poster of these projects at the sage-grouse workshop.

### **EAST IDAHO UPLANDS**

The East Idaho Uplands LWG is another new group that is currently working on its plan. Because the planning area is so large and does not have a population center, the group had alternating meetings at

Blackfoot and Montpelier/Soda Springs. However, they recently started having simultaneous meetings at the 2 locations using a conference phone!

The group identified 6 major

threats for their planning area, including 2 that were not identified in the State Plan. These were 1) lack of data and 2) conversion of CRP back to agricultural production.

### **GREATER CURLEW VALLEY**

The Greater Curlew Valley LWG has 2 habitat projects underway. The first is forage kochia plantings for fire breaks on the Curlew National Grasslands. The second involves restoration trials on rangelands dominated by

bulbous bluegrass and crested wheatgrass. This project also includes collecting locally adapted sagebrush seed, growing it out at the Lucky Peak Nursery, then hand-planting the seedlings.

The group presented a poster showing preliminary results of their vegetation mapping and radio-telemetry projects at the sage-grouse workshop. The group's next meeting is in December.

### **JARBIDGE**

As most of you know the Jarbridge area was devastated by the Murphy Complex and Scott fires this summer with over 600,000 acres of shrub steppe habitat burned.

The Jarbridge group has completed its Conservation Plan and is waiting for the last few letters of support from LWG members, before submitting the plan.

The group is planning to start the IDL artificial wetland/wet meadow project this coming spring. Right now they are just waiting to get all the clearances from BLM for the pipeline right of way.

### **NORTH MAGIC VALLEY**

The North Magic Valley (NMV) LWG met on August 15, 2007. Participants began discussions to identify and prioritize threats to sage-grouse populations and their habitats in the NMV planning area. The group established a subcommittee to coordinate development of draft popula-

tion objectives. Participants also discussed the upcoming November workshop, the possibility of having a presentation on CCAAs, and nomination of potential representatives to the SAC. Tentative agenda items for their next meeting include an update on NMV sage-grouse population

including the impacts of fire and West Nile Virus in 2007, an update from the population objectives subcommittee, and continued discussion to identify and prioritize threats to sage-grouse populations and habitats in the planning area.

## LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES, CONTINUED.

### OWYHEE

The Owyhee LWG reports that the reseeding they did last year on the Chubby Spain fire is doing well. The group is excited about their juniper mastication project. They recently had a field trip and have formed a subcommittee to prioritize areas on private

land that have or used to have sage-grouse. The sub-committee traveled to California to observe a large-scale juniper mastication project, which has been underway for about 4 years. The process was so efficient that you could not tell that junipers were

once there!

The Tongue Complex fire may have been good for sage-grouse habitat! This fire burned in a juniper encroachment area and in some places it only burned as a crown fire in the junipers.

**If you have any ideas for the next newsletter, please contact Ann Moser at 208-287-2705 or [amoser@idfg.idaho.gov](mailto:amoser@idfg.idaho.gov)**



### SHOSHONE BASIN

There was one fire that encroached into our planning area, and another that occurred on an allotment that had been prioritized for planning. Fortunately, neither fire burned critical habitat; however, BLM personnel were busy with other fires in south central Idaho.

A proposed riparian fence was laid out this summer. This fence will protect 2 acres of semi-wet meadow around a pond that is a key water source for sage-grouse. It is

hoped that cost-share funds will be available for fence installation.

Work also continued on our sagebrush mapping project. IDFG is inputting vegetative cover data from the 2006 mapping effort into a database that will allow the data to be linked to polygons on the sagebrush cover map. Preliminary results from 2006 show an overall increase in shrub cover across the planning area when compared to the 1992 maps. The most

apparent changes occurred in those areas previously mapped as 0-5% canopy cover, many of which now map in the 6-15% canopy range or greater. In addition, increased access to private lands, allowed for refinement of the original sagebrush polygons.

IDFG did not alter the sage grouse hunting season. Preliminary results appear that hunter success was similar to previous years.

### SOUTH MAGIC VALLEY

The South Magic Valley LWG is under development! Several agency folks met on October 10 and discussed a strategy for the future. First, the group decided to search for a facilitator to help them organ-

ize and lead meetings. Once a facilitator is chosen, they will have a public meeting, where they will introduce people to sage-grouse and sagebrush issues in the South Magic Valley planning area.

They are looking for people from the general public, private landowners, or industry groups to become involved in the LWG and to help plan for future projects in the planning area.

### UPPER SNAKE

Although it was a very dry in the Upper Snake, folks reported seeing lots of chicks. The group's Berry Creek Burn

project has been appealed and therefore the project is on hold. The adjacent LWG in Montana is concerned about

proposed powerlines in the area and are working with the Upper Snake LWG.

### WEST CENTRAL

The West Central LWG continues its telemetry study. Since March 2005, we have collared 51 birds. We are currently tracking 8 males and 2 females. The females were collared in the spring of 2006 and we've been able to follow their movements for over a

year. At each sighting, wildlife technician Gene Gray records the vegetation in the area where he finds the birds. We are building a useful database of the areas, habitats, and potential food sources the birds are using at different times of the year. We

plan to collar 3 females each from 10 selected leks next spring.

The group has a draft programmatic CCA and 3 ranches have developed draft CCAs. The group is still jumping through hoops to get the plan approved.

A CCA is a Candidate Conservation Agreement. It is a formal agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and one or more parties to address the conservation needs of proposed or candidate species, or species likely to become candidates, before they become listed as endangered or threatened.

A CCAA, Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances, provides incentives to non-federal landowners to conserve candidate species. For more information, visit <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/candidates/index.html>

## IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Visit our website for a detailed workshop summary (and more)!  
<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/hunt/grouse/>



## IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

On November 2 and 3, 2007 the Idaho Department of Fish and Game convened a workshop titled, *Learning from the Past and Looking to the Future: Sage-grouse Conservation in Idaho*, in Sun Valley, Idaho. Approximately 80 individuals including LWG members from throughout Idaho, private citizens and landowners, non-governmental organizations, and state and federal agency representatives participated in the event.

The workshop was kicked off on Friday evening with a poster session and banquet. Several LWGs and others presented posters on their sage-grouse conservation projects.

The morning session on Saturday included several presentations. After lunch there was a panel presentation about funding opportunities for sage-grouse conservation.

Next, participants were involved in two interactive dialogs. The first interactive session was called *Lessons Learned in the Trenches*. The

session was structured around the 19 threats identified in the state plan. Workshop participants were invited to rotate through a series of discussions at different threat stations throughout the room. Participants were asked to discuss and respond to two questions:

- What have the LWGs and/or agencies been able to do to reduce this threat?
- What has impeded the LWGs and/or agencies effectiveness in addressing this threat?

Participants' responses were recorded on flip charts and are part of the permanent record of the workshop.

For the second interactive session, *Call to Action*, participants were asked to respond to the question, "Where should Idaho Fish and Game, the LWGs, and the land management agencies focus their attention over the next ten years?" Each participant wrote their one answer on a piece of paper, then posted it on a wall, while also organizing their answer with similar ones on the wall. Ultimately, the facilitator and participants grouped the

answers into ten subjects. In the next step participants were asked to rank the ten subjects using a dot polling method. Each participant was given two dots and was invited to place their dots on the categories that they felt to be most important. The results of that ranking were:

- Habitat—36 dots
- Fire—22 dots
- Science-based policy—18 dots
- Regional planning—11 dots
- Infrastructure—10 dots
- Public education—7 dots
- Livestock impact—2 dots
- Travel management—2 dots
- West Nile Virus—1 dot
- Quit using fossil fuels—0 dots

Jim Unsworth, IDFG Wildlife Bureau Chief, closed the workshop by inviting participants to focus their attention during the coming decade on the priorities they had identified in this exercise.

## WEST CENTRAL LWG MEMBER TRIES OUT LAWSON AERATOR

Royce Schwenfelder of SS Cattle Company in Cambridge was looking for an alternative to prescribed burning to re-invigorate range-land with high shrub cover. Five years ago, he purchased a Lawson aerator. He used it on an area where bitterbrush had grown to over 6 feet in height

and the extensive shrub canopy had reduced grasses and forbs. The aerator crushed the biggest shrubs, while passing over younger, smaller

bitterbrush and sagebrush. At the same time, Schwenfelder seeded grasses.

This past spring, fellow West Central LWG member and range consultant Steve Leonard compared vegetation cover on the treated area (5 years post-treatment) with two similar but untreated sites. Leonard used a 100-foot line intercept transect to determine total shrub canopy cover. Perennial grass, perennial forb, annual grass and annual forb cover was measured within 10, 20x50 centimeter Daubenmire frames at 10-foot intervals along the line transect. He found that total shrub cover on the aerated site was 25.2%, vs. 40.1% and

49.2% on the untreated sites. Perennial grasses on the treated site measured 18.0%, vs. just 2.4% and 6.9% on untreated areas. Perennial forbs made up 10.5% of the cover after aeration, compared to 7.1% and 8.25% on untreated areas.

It appears that treatment with the Lawson aerator can provide an alternative to prescribed fire or tillage for decreasing over-dense shrub cover. This test treatment has allowed restoration of the herbaceous understory while maintaining a substantial sagebrush/bitterbrush component for sage-grouse habitat.

